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SUBJECT: MARCH 16-18 VISIT OF THE NAC TO AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Christopher W. Dell for Reasons
1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 18, the NATO Senior Civilian Representative (NATO SCR) in Afghanistan reviewed key themes discussed by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) with senior Afghan figures for the Kabul NATO Caucus during the NAC's recent visit. In the NAC meeting with cabinet ministers, Interior (MOI) Minister Atmar pressed for NATO support for more than a doubling of the current authorized size of the Afghan National Police (ANP). President Karzai was relaxed and confident about finding a legitimate way ahead to stay on as head of government in the interim period from May 21 until free and fair elections in August 2009. Lower House Speaker Qanooni struck a responsible stance on the need for stability in the run-up to elections and stressed the importance of having international observers here in August. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On March 18, NATO SCR Ambassador Gentilini provided Kabul-based NATO Caucus representatives with a readout on meetings of the NAC delegation with President Karzai, senior cabinet ministers, and the Parliamentary Lower House Speaker. The NAC, led by NATO Secretary General (SYG) Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, met at MFA with Foreign Minister Dr. Rangin Spanta, National Security Advisor Zalmai Rassoul, Defense Minister (MOD) Abdul Rahim Wardak, Interior Minister (MOI) Hanif Atmar, and Jelani Popal, head of the Independent Directorate for Local Government (IDLG). According to Gentilini, the Foreign Minister led a general discussion on the regional context of the Afghanistan war, including the roles of Pakistan, Russia and Iran. There was an overall mood of trying to understand the situation in depth, with an emphasis on positive trends, according to Gentilini. The intervention by Interior Minister Atmar took the longest and dominated the exchange. Atmar focused on the progress of the Afghan National Police (ANP) under the Focused District Development (FDD) program run by the U.S. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), and through contributions by EUPOL. He cited successes in counter-narcotics (CN) and against corruption. Some arrests had been made and criminals brought to justice. Atmar said that MOI had the political will to "hold" districts against the insurgents and to pursue true law enforcement, but the size of the ANP was inadequate for the task. He asked for NATO support for expansion of the ANP by "double" (from a planned 82 thousand) and later raised that goal to 180 thousand. Atmar said the ANP needed gendarmerie-type training and capabilities. He also described in strong, positive terms the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) pilot being set up in Wardak province to engage local communities in their own security.

¶3. (C) NATO SCR Gentilini reported that President Karzai had a brief one-on-one with the NATO SYG before an exchange with the NAC delegation. In contrast to the SYG's November visit to Afghanistan (reftel), Karzai was "in good form," exuding a positive, confident mood, and the meeting was conducted in a friendly atmosphere. Karzai sought to convey a sense of progress and confidence that he would lead Afghanistan in the interim period between expiration of his presidency on May 21

and August elections. The keys were "legitimacy and stability." He said that, with the help of the Chief Justice, a legitimate solution for a government in that timeframe could be found. It would be important to do this in an "unforced" way which people understood. Karzai said his approach was to "go to the people," and he added in passing that, if necessary, that could involve a solution through Parliament or Loya Jirga. His comment on the August elections was that they should be "fair and free" and that the right of women to vote should be emphasized. Karzai also expressed satisfaction with progress on relations with Pakistan, and was positive about recent U.S. and UK statements on the regional situation. He mentioned reconciliation briefly and said he wanted to see some movement ahead before elections. He said he was hopeful about the most recent Saudi initiative to foster reconciliation.

14. (C) NATO SCR Gentilini found it significant that Karzai did not mention the GIROA's proposed Military Technical Agreement (MTA) at all, and only remarked glancingly on civilian casualties when one of the NATO ambassadors raised the topic.

15. (C) The NAC also met with Yunus Qanooni, Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament. Gentilini said that Qanooni took positions that were totally as expected, such as stressing the importance of preparing properly for the August elections, and implying that Karzai should step down. Gentilini noted, however, that Qanooni's tone was "not tough." The Speaker reportedly mentioned that some in the United Front (UF) were "going to the other side." He did not

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talk further about internal party dynamics but said he expected UF to do well in the elections. He stated that the UF wanted to see stability in the run-up to elections and also stressed the importance of having international observers come to Afghanistan for the August polling.

16. (C) Ambassador Gentilini said that the message of the NATO SYG and the NAC to all interlocutors was that the path ahead was for Afghans to decide, but the international community wants to see "stability, continuity, and legitimacy" in the ongoing political process, all of which should result in fair, free and credible elections.

17. (C) After Gentilini's presentation, several NATO Caucus representatives commented. The Belgian asked how the NATO SYG had reacted to MOI Minister Atmar's request for an increase in the ANP size. Belgium's perception, he said, was that an increase was "crap" and that there had to be more of a focus on quality first. Gentilini responded only that the SYG had not felt the meeting was the place to engage on that issue, which will be discussed further in other fora. Gentilini pointed out, however, that the NAC delegations fanning out around Afghanistan had returned pleasantly surprised that security, even in the South, was not as bad as expected. The French Ambassador remarked on Qanooni that he was saying "Everything's fine, Mom" when in fact that is not the case. The Spanish Ambassador complained that Kabul-based ambassadors had not been afforded enough interaction with the NAC ambassadors. He claimed that the NAC delegation had not been properly briefed, especially on the security situation, and tabled a formal protest. Gentilini accepted the point on including the local ambassadors more and said he would make appropriate arrangements for the next NAC visit.

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